West Fifteenth and Vine, Cincinnati: A Journey Through One of Stephen Shore's Uncommon Places

by Kurt Easterwood

Given the number of photographs included in *Uncommon Places: The Complete Works*, and the geographic scope of the work, where not so much the pictures themselves as the rather unceremonious date and place captions that accompany them help us to feel that the book encompasses a totality of an experience, we subconsciously assume that Stephen Shore didn't linger long in most of the places he visited as he gathered that material that would be published first in 1982 as *Uncommon Places*, and collected again in the revised and expanded volume published by Aperture in 2004, which I am concerning myself with here.

In interviews Shore has talked about how he moved from the 35mm handheld candid snapshot tour of America that would later be published as *American Surfaces* (published in 1999, but shot in 1972) to the fixed tripod, large format photographic tour of *Uncommon Places* as one that changed his way of seeing completely, and how it caused him to "develop a taste for certainty". This naturally caused the subject matter to evolve.

Though Shore never completely abandoned the more spontaneous diaristic subject matter of hotel breakfasts and motel lobbies — and indeed, used the opportunity of *Uncommon Places*' republishing to incorporate much more of that type of subject matter than had been in the original book, *Uncommon Places: The Complete Works* is still predominantly made up of scenes from the vast and varied North American landscape. But Shore's move from the loose, often irreverent style of *American Surfaces* to the more measured photographs of

Uncommon Places doesn't in fact mean that he was any less full of wanderlust than when he shot the latter. (If we take Shore's captions at face value, and there is no reason why we shouldn't, he could shoot in Farmington, Maine one day and be 400 miles away in Watertown, New York two days later.) But Shore's taste for certainty, and the textural difference between the photos in American Surfaces and Uncommon Places — more so than the subject matter itself — invites us to explore to such a degree that conversely the individual photos themselves almost become less important, or less belonging to Shore, if you will.

[...] especially if I'm photographing an intersection, I don't have to have a single point of emphasis in the picture. It can be complex, because it's so detailed that the viewer can take time and read it — look at something here, and look at something there. They can pay attention to a lot more.²

I would like to explore *Uncommon Places: The Complete Works* by looking at a single photo, a photo that like all the photos of *Uncommon Places* can only be referred to by its caption, "West Fifteenth St. and Vine St., Cincinnati, Ohio, May 1, 1974", which appears on page 43. This photo was not included in the original publication, and while it would certainly be a useful exercise to discuss why not, I would rather take Shore's inclusion of the photo in the revised edition to mean that for him the photograph is an important part of the complete work.

It is tempting to be self-deprecating on the photograph's behalf and acknowledge that it's true there is nothing particularly compelling about this photo that would cause it to stand out in relation to the other photographs in the book, but saying that would imply that *Uncommon Places: The Complete Works* contains stand-out photographs. It does not, which is precisely why it is such a wonderful book to look at. The power of *Uncommon Places* is not the sort where each turn of the page knocks us back into a sublime revelry. Its power rather results from an accumulation of what Gerry Badger has called "quiet" photographs³, and it is this quiet tone that allows us, if we are so willing, to journey along with Shore, and occasionally to step off and linger a bit at stops along the way, to explore further.

Several years ago when I got my copy of *Uncommon Places: The Complete Works*, this ordinary, dare I say *nondescript*, photograph taken in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1974 caused me to dwell and ponder a bit longer than the others. For personal reasons (I had a suspicion I had once been on this section of Vine street during a visit to Cincinnati in 1987), and for graphic, visual reasons (there was something in the denseness of the signage on the left side of the photo, and a single, dominant sign on the right side that visually appealed to me), I felt compelled to explore the photo further. What follows is an account of this one stop on Shore's larger journey — my journey within a journey, we could say — and what I found at West Fifteenth and Vine in Cincinnati.

Before we begin the journey, perhaps a brief guidebook-like history of the place in the photograph is worth reading. Fifteenth and Vine is in Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine (or OTR) neighborhood, one of the oldest parts of the city. It came to prominence — and indeed acquired its name — from the many German immigrants who worked there in the 1800s and later settled in the area and built many of the homes and buildings that

stand to this day. By the turn of the century, Cincinnati, along with cities like Milwaukee and St. Louis, was home to one of the largest Germany immigrant communities in the United States. However, while already in a long, slow decline in the first half of the 20th century — in particular, its many breweries were hit hard by Prohibition — OTR's fortunes declined rapidly after World War II as so-called "white flight" began to take hold, with residents moving to outlying suburbs and retail businesses following them shortly thereafter. The deteriorating structures became a source of cheap housing for a successive wave of first poor whites from Appalachia and then African Americans displaced from the historically black neighborhood of West End that had been demolished in part by the construction of an expressway — an expressway that if not a literal escape route was at least a figurative thoroughfare that helped pave the way for whites' exodus to suburbia.⁴

At the time when Shore took his photograph, the population of OTR was only around 15,000, a significant drop from a population of 45,000 in 1900. One-third of these remaining residents were African American. By 1990, less than 10,000 people lived in the area, 71% of them African American.⁵ In 2001, Vine Street and the surrounding areas were the scenes of a race riot when an African American teenager was shot and killed by a member of the overwhelmingly white Cincinnati police force. As of this writing, Vine Street and various other places in OTR are part of a massive urban renewal project, and indeed most of the land and buildings in the 1400 block of Vine Street, which comprises much of Shore's photo, are now owned by a tax-exempt, private, non-profit corporation called The Cincinnati Center City Development Corp., or 3CDC, which has renovated or is in the process of renovating the structures for loft apartments or retail spaces.⁶

Beginning on the left of the photograph, the first stop to catch our attention is the building with the "Teen Challenge" sign on it. We see what looks to be an old home that has perhaps been converted to a business, or at least there is a business on the ground floor, a not atypical end-result of much of OTR by this point, and indeed of most American cities by the 1970s. The business itself is unknown to us, with only the sign featuring the tantalizingly oblique "Teen Challenge" to go on. Perhaps it isn't a business at all, but rather a youth center. Or maybe it's some sort of school — a school for Miss Teen U.S.A. beauty pageant aspirants fancifully springs to my mind. What we can say with some certainty, however, is that it's one of the few signs in the entire photo that has an ambiguity to it, the only sign where its metaphorical value exceeds its descriptive value.⁷

Color expands a photograph's palette and adds a new level of descriptive information and transparency to the image. It is more transparent because one is stopped less by the surface — color is more like how we see. It has added description because it shows the color of light and the colors of a culture or an age.⁸

Continuing along, we come to what is unmistakably a paint store. There is no mystery here, the unabashed explicitness of the sign perhaps causing even a chuckle or two. And yet, for all its clear intentions, the sign is abstract, almost conceptual. Is it a noun, or a call to action? There is also something vaguely American about the sign — the thick font of the word "PAINT" and the sign's perpendicular placement rendering it more advertisement than descriptive plaque. The name of the company — the

Cincinnati Color Company — is seen at the bottom of the sign, it's placement on a Googie-ish artist's palette relegating it to second billing vis-a-vis "PAINT", the star of the show. As far as can be seen in the book's reproduction of the photo (unfortunately I have not seen an actual print), this is the only sign in the photo that explicitly tells us that we are in fact looking at a picture taken in Cincinnati. Here too the sign is at once literal and practical, and yet also abstract, with "Color" on its own line and in larger font. We could hardly imagine that a paint store would sell colorless paint, and yet the sign feels the need to tell us the obvious.

It seems clear that this is a commercial paint store, and not, say, an art supply store. This certainty comes not from the sign itself, though it could be argued that it would be unlikely that "PAINT" would refer to the action instead of to the thing itself. It comes from my own experience of the urban American environment of the 70s and 80s, where stores selling things like linoleum tiles or Venetian blinds or light bulbs — we can reference the photos from Duluth, MN and Parkersburg, WV (pages 35) and 41, respectively) here — would often take up residence in urban locations, seemingly at odds with the consumer needs of the residents of those locations. These stores existed in some in-between world that was neither retail store nor commercial showroom, and seemed so uninviting to anyone's custom, and therefore infrequently patronized. The front display windows of these businesses would invariably feature a sparse selection of strange objects like pipes or paint chip samples, backed by faded posters extolling the unintelligible virtues of whatever consumerunfriendly product was on display.

On a visual level, the paint store's sign colors of orange and blue, though slightly faded, dominate the left hand portion of the photo, and serve as a

counterpoint to the even more dominant pawnshop advertisement in the center of the photo. We shall have more to say about that sign later on in our journey.⁹

Beyond the restaurant serving chili the signage gets more obscure (again, in the reproduction I have access to), but we can pull out "Pepsi" and "Coca Cola", signs that are more or less singed into our synapses and therefore more seen than read, and "Wall Paper," which connects itself with the paint store. But what dominates here is the "KROGER" atop the lone skyscraper in the photo. Non-Americans might find it curious that this vaguely German-sounding name is so prominently displayed, but the sign and the building belong to one of Cincinnati's homegrown success stories, a supermarket chain that at present day is the second largest general retailer in America behind Walmart, but which started as a single store opened in 1883 by the son of German immigrants, Barney Kroger. By 1902, Kroger had incorporated his grocery store and bakery business, and expanded to some 40 stores in the Cincinnati area, including the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood. In 1959, the Kroger Building was built to house the company's head offices, and though it had a facelift in the early 80s, it still serves as the company's headquarters and continues to dominate the skyline in much the same way it appears to in Shore's photograph. 10

For viewers who do recognize Kroger for the supermarket company that it is, seeing this sign on a tall building rather than on a sprawling low-rise suburban building, feels dislocating. Supermarkets are not supposed to be vertical structures towering above the neighborhood, cold and aloof. The viewer feels as if they're seeing something that would normally be

hidden from view, something that is at odds with the warm communal aspect of the supermarket. There is clearly no food being sold here.¹¹

But if we leave for the moment the cultural and historical resonances and return to the photograph itself, the visual stature of this building is anything but dominant. To use "skyscraper" to describe it is in truth overly generous. The building's height (or lack of it) relative to the other visual elements in the photo — and crucially to the "PAINT" sign to the left and the pawnshop advertisement on the right — and its slightly faded appearance, knock the building's visual status down a peg or two.

Additionally, the appearance of the building itself further reduces its standing. In the bottom two-thirds of the building, almost all of the office windows have had the curtains drawn, so that the building gives off a uniform look. Yet, in the upper third, many of the offices have the curtains pulled back, breaking up the consistent pattern. This may mean that only the upper floor offices are in use, but from a distance it looks as if the upper windows have been blown out, the offices abandoned. No doubt this pattern is the result of benign happenstance, yet it allows us to conjure up two contradictory imaginings: Either the property owner can't lease out the bottom two-thirds of its office space, or it has decided to leave vacant and abandoned the building's upper floors.

The most dominant part of the entire photo is the painted wall advertisement for the pawn shops. Of course its size, to say nothing of its central position in the photograph, is the biggest determinant for this dominance, but there are other reasons as well. It is arguably the most colorful element in the photo, and as such seems to be the freshest or newest element in the entire scene. Its vividness gives it an almost 3-D

quality, and it appears to be floating, which is ironic since it is literally the most grounded signage in the photo. The ad is also by a long way the most text heavy of the signage that appears in the photo, with the most expressive language, using a string of imperative verbs ("see", "save", "buy", "borrow") to establish an optimistic enthusiasm that is not shared by the rest of the scene, the demeanor of the people the sign hovers over, or indeed the economic raison d'être of pawn shops themselves.

These days examples of painted wall advertising in American cities are becoming scarce, and those examples that one does see are usually so-called "ghost signs," that is, the faded remnants of ads created long ago. Well before Shore took his photo, wall advertising had been eclipsed by the cheaper and more flexible billboard as the primary means of outdoor advertising. 12 The advertisement therefore plays with our expectations of what such an ad should and shouldn't be. Rather than being the faded ghost of a no longer relevant advertisement, and by extension a faded remnant of a more static, less-transient bygone era, the advertisement subverts these expectations even as its very existence willfully flaunts its faux anachronism. In this way it shares much with the "PAINT" sign — both signs stir up the present-day viewer's natural inclination for nostalgia and the (false) sense of "a time when life was simpler", while obscuring the economic message that the businesses they are meant to represent are sending out.

Judging by the figures in the foreground, the ad begins about six feet off the ground, and extends to the third floor of the building it is painted on. (The building itself seems to have a barbershop on the first floor and apartments on the upper floors). That this ad was painted where it was tells us something about the downtown urban landscape that might not

be readily apparent. For such an ad to be effective — and cost-effective for the company — potential customers would need to have an unimpeded view of it. A street corner building would of course be most advantageous in this regard but it would be unusual for a corner building to have a wall both flat enough and devoid of windows to accommodate such a large and low to the ground wall painting.

Therefore, in order for such a space to have become available to potential advertisers, there would have had to have been some calamity, such as a fire, that befell its neighboring building or structure which resulted in that building's demolishment. We don't of course know what happened to whatever structure previously occupied the now-vacant street corner location, but we can feel the lot's emptiness and disuse, which is emphasized by the pylons and chain surrounding it.¹³

Given the vividness of the advertisement, it seems safe to assume that it was painted not too long before Shore took this photo. It is also within the realm of possibility that this ad space has only recently become available, and not so long before this photo was taken there did exist a building on the corner. Therefore, such a bright, vivid ad, effusive in its color palette and language, seems to mock the very building it has in effect replaced. It maintains a dominance over its lowly neighbor, at the same time that it dominates the visual landscape of the photograph itself.

At the top of the ad, we are brightly asked, "Need Money? See Will." Because the word "see" has been painted in small type and appears almost squeezed in between the question mark and "Will," as if it were an afterthought, the "Will" seems curious — is the ad saying one needs a will in order to get money? — until we realize that the pawn shop chain is

called Will's Pawn Shop. Either way, the ad's direct appeal to potential customers is also felt by the viewer of the photo, given that it's the only element in the photo where the viewer feels directly addressed, directly implicated. It's the only explicit advertisement in the photo, and along with the "Meet and Eat" sign at far left, the only signage in the photo that uses verbs to communicate with the consumer/viewer.

The contrast between this ad for a chain of pawn shops and the passive advertisement that is the "Kroger Building" is striking. Visually of course there is an interplay between the (relatively) tall building in the deep background and its modest counterpart in the foreground, a disparity that is upended by how Shore has chosen to frame the image. In addition, we have the faded appearance of the drab office building and Kroger sign, contrasted with the bright, bubbly, and personalized appeal of the pawn shop ad.

On the other hand, the Kroger building is there before our eyes, solid and inviolable, a proverbial ivory tower for the corporate overlords of hundreds of stores and the beneficiaries of the custom of millions. The pawn shop business with its three locations can't begin to compete with that. As if to ram that point home, the pawn shops don't even exist for us — they are merely referred to by the ad, a pointer to locations elsewhere.

These contrasting elements offer an ironic comment on the "white flight" phenomenon that had been set in motion well before Shore arrived to snap his photograph, where the early 1940s influx of poor African Americans wanting to take their part in the wartime economy caused middle class whites in ever increasing numbers to abandon the urban core of American cities for suburban areas. As the customer base began to

vanish, businesses packed up for the brighter economic landscape of the suburban shopping malls, leaving what criminologists call negative land use businesses like pawn shops and check cashing establishments such as the one seen in the far right of Shore's photo to become the anchor tenants of an abandoned and increasingly impoverished urban center blighted by empty, decaying buildings, absentee landlords, and exploitative businesses.¹⁴

Up to now I have not discussed the people that appear in the photo, but they too have an important part to play. They can't be read and interpreted in the way the buildings and signs can, and the fact that almost all of the distinguishable people in the photograph are caught midaction, such as exiting a car or crossing the intersection, serves to enforce this inscrutability. It would be dangerous to make assumptions about them but it's hard not to find it curious that the only people aware of Shore taking his photograph — or the only two to be caught in the act of awareness — are two white men. The fact that they are walking across Shore's field of vision makes their rubber-necking gaze all the more forceful, their interest in Shore not one of curiosity but hostility, particularly from the person at far right.

This person exiting the frame at right and the person exiting the car come as close to a "decisive moment" as one is likely to get in *Uncommon Places: The Complete Works*. The two figures headed in opposite directions are like fence posts, drawing and then keeping our attention to the pawn shop ad, the vacant lot, and the three other figures, despite the ostensibly more visually exciting mélange of signs and buildings on the left-hand side of the photograph. They serve to demarcate a frame within the larger frame of Shore's photograph. Guilty by association, or by being

in the wrong place at the wrong time, they come to be defined by the downtrodden triumvirate of pawn shop, vacant lot, and check-cashing store.

Using the view camera forces conscious decision-making. You can't sort of stand somewhere — you stand exactly where you want to be. 15

As our last stop on this exploratory journey, a final sightseeing viewpoint as it were, let's ponder for a moment one more spot at the corner of Vine and Fifteenth, the spot Shore placed his tripod and set up his view camera to capture this scene. Shore's presence, and the position of his tripod and camera, is referred to, if not exactly reflected in Lee Friedlander-like fashion, by the out of focus "Bus Stop: No Standing" sign that could be nowhere else but directly in front of where Shore was standing. We smile at the sign like we do at other occasional ironical signage in *Uncommon Places* — e.g. "MECCA" (p. 129) or "John F. Kennedy said: "ART IS TRUTH"" (P. 133) — as if Shore were thumbing his nose at the municipal establishment that would deign to tell him where he could or could not stand his tripod.

But telling people where they can or cannot stand in the form of municipal anti-loitering ordinances has long been a tactic used by city governments and police forces to exert undue control over citizens in lower-income areas. Three years before Shore took his photo, the U.S. Supreme Court had struck down Cincinnati's own anti-loitering ordinance as unconstitutional. The ordinance had held that "It shall be unlawful for three or more persons to assemble, except at a public meeting of citizens, on any of the sidewalks, street corners, vacant lots, or mouths of alleys, and

there conduct themselves in a manner annoying to persons passing by, or occupants of adjacent buildings." In a footnote to his opinion, Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart wrote that, "The alleged discriminatory enforcement of this ordinance figured prominently in the background of the serious civil disturbances that took place in Cincinnati in June 1967," by which he was referring to race riots in the Cincinnati neighborhood of Avondale that spread over into Over-the-Rhine.

The sign can then be read not just as a joke of Shore's own making, but as an ironic and not necessarily unintentional questioning of Shore's right to be there, assembling these elements in a manner annoying to persons passing by, "an alien element *impeding* the activity on the street." ¹⁷

At most, Shore probably spent about 30 minutes standing at the corner of Fifteenth and Vine, framing the scene, adjusting the focus, measuring the light, preparing the film holder, and tripping the shutter. We can be fairly certain he did all these things blissfully unaware of Over-the-Rhine's German immigrant antecedents, trends in outdoor advertising, or pawn shops as economic indicators. Nor is it likely that Shore took the inverted image he found on his camera's ground glass and flipped it over in his mind, ruminating on what sociological discourse the graphical elements contained within his frame's borders might conspire to conjure up for future travelers on his tour of uncommon places.

Thus there is a very real possibility that readers will bristle at my deconstruction of this photo, and the introduction of what may seem like incidental history and tangential politics in an attempt to locate the photo

within a much broader context than Shore ever intended. Seeing as I'm likely guilty as charged on that count, in my defense let me stipulate that I see the tour I took of "West Fifteenth St. and Vine St., Cincinnati, Ohio, May 1, 1974" less as a deconstruction of an image and more a construction of a separate image, akin say to Mark Klett's rephotography projects. ¹⁸ Like the spirit in which those are undertaken, the aim has not been to bring Shore's original photo kicking and screaming into a context imposed from outside, or to re-align it to fight some rhetorical battle, but to merely have it in hand like a trusty map as I negotiate its spaces nearly 40 years later. It's my hope that the new topography I have constructed as a result informs the old, much as Shore's two-dimensional photographs in *Uncommon Places* built upon and informed their physical counterparts.

Acknowledgment:

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Notes:

¹ Aaron Schuman, "Uncommon Places: An Interview with Stephen Shore," SEESAW MAGAZINE (http://seesawmagazine.com/shore_pages/shore_interview.html) (January, 2004), accessed February, 2012.

² Ibid.

³ Gerry Badger, "Stephen Shore, In Praise of a 'Quiet' Photographer" in *Stephen Shore: Uncommon Places 50 Unpublished Photographs 1973-1978*, by Stephen Shore and Gerry Badger (Dusseldorf: Verlag der Galerie Conrads, 2002). Writes Badger: "'Quiet' photographs do not lack a voice, but that voice is always calm, measured, appropriate, reasonable." This book would be a nice stopgap if *Uncommon Places: The Complete Works* was not available were it not for the overly-aggressive cropping of some of the images, including the one I am writing about here.

- ⁴ Miller, Zane L.; Tucker, Bruce, Changing Plans for America's Inner Cities: Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine and Twentieth-Century Urbanism (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1999). This book, available as a free-to-download .pdf from https://kb.osu.edu/dspace/bitstream/ 1811/29305/1/CHANGING PLANS FOR AMERICAS INNER CITIES.pdf (accessed February, 2012), is a well-researched and fascinating, if perhaps arcane for casual readers, study of the cultural and racial history of the Over-the-Rhine district.
- ⁵ Ibid, xix.
- ⁶ See http://www.3cdc.org/who-we-are/, accessed February, 2012. for 3CDC's naturally boosterish vision of who they are and what they hope to accomplish in Over-the-Rhine.
- ⁷ http://www.teenchallengecincinnati.org/men.html#history, accessed February, 2012. Teen Challenge is in fact a Christian outreach program for troubled teenagers and drug addicts, and the Cincinnati branch had opened at this Vine St. location in 1973, a year before Shore took his photo. In April, 1974, one month before Shore took his photo, one of its founders Ken Bagwell was brutally beaten, ironically while taking photos in a local park (he died from his injuries two years later). Teen Challenge subsequently moved to outside the city.
- 8 Stephen Shore, The Nature of Photographs, 2nd Edition (London: Phaidon, 2007), 18.
- ⁹ The sign, in different colors, still exists today and the fact that the former home of the Cincinnati Color Company is now referred to as "The Paint Building" by its current owners, the aforementioned 3CDC, can be taken as hope that the sign will be preserved.
- ¹⁰http://www.thekrogerco.com/corpnews/corpnewsinfo_history.htm, accessed February, 2012. Ironically, today the Kroger Building also houses the head offices of 3CDC.
- ¹¹ Today, to the left of the building with the "Meet & Eat" sign on the far left of Shore's photo, there exists both a Kroger supermarket, as well as a historical marker that explains about the history of Kroger and its contribution to the local economy. A 2011 article (http://www.urbancincy.com/ 2011/06/cincinnatis-urban-kroger-stores-face-a-unique-design-opportunity/, accessed February, 2012) noted the irony of its location four blocks away from Kroger's headquarters, and described it as "one of the most neglected stores in the city, if not the region." Unfortunately, I have not been able to ascertain whether this Kroger supermarket existed when Shore took his photograph.
- ¹² "Apparitions of the Past: The Ghost Signs of Fort Collins: A Historical Context", HISTORITECTURE, LLC (prepared for the City of Fort Collins, Larimer County, Colorado, July, 2007), 13. This is available as a .pdf from http://www.fcgov.com/historicpreservation/pdf/ghost-signs-doc.pdf (accessed February, 2012).
- ¹³ To this day nearly 40 years later this corner lot at 1437 Vine Street remains undeveloped, or rather un-redeveloped, unless you consider paving and putting up a gated parking lot "development".
- ¹⁴ Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, "Hot Spots of Bus Stop Crime: The Importance of Environmental Attributes" (1998), 17. This paper is available online at http://www.uctc.net/research/papers/384.pdf (accessed February, 2012). There are many studies of pawn shops and check-cashing services and their negative impact on urban neighborhoods. I chose this one because it is available online, and for admittedly ironic cheap shot seeing as Shore was standing at a bus stop when he took his photo.
- ¹⁵ Schuman.

- ¹⁶ COATES v. CITY OF CINCINNATI, 402 U.S. 611 (1971). The opinion can be found at http://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/402/611/case.html, accessed February, 2012.
- ¹⁷ Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen, "Stephen Shore's Uncommon Places," in *Uncommon Places: The Complete Works*, by Stephen Shore (New York: Aperture, 2004), 11.
- ¹⁸ See http://www.thirdview.org/3v/home/index.html for one of many manifestations of Klett's rephotography projects he has undertaken since the 1970s.